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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent to which adults engage in reading tasks to meet a variety of personal purposes and needs, asking when engaged reading is most likely to occur for types of text sources, reading purposes, reading settings, educational attainment groups, and occupational groups. Subjects included 159 adults who represented a wide range of occupations and who recorded their everyday reading practices for 5 days. Results indicated the following rankings: (1) most prevalent text sources types were periodicals, general books and religious materials, and informational texts; (2) 29% of engaged reading was for functional/informational/consumer purposes, 25% leisure, and 25% work; (3) 58% of reading took place at home; (4) the agricultural, trade, and health care occupational groups reported similar numbers of reading events, while businesses reported less; and (5) persons aged 36-49 read the most, followed by ages 50-84 and 20-35. Findings suggest that engaged reading behavior is relatively rare overall, engaged reading is mostly for functional purposes, and engaged reading occurred as frequently for the least as well as the most educated adults. Further research should include observations of engaged reading behaviors and interviews to determine variables contributing to adults' reading engagement. (Contains 11 references.) (EF)

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Adults' Engagement in Reading: A Test of Engagement Theory

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 24-28, 1997.

Adults' Engagement in Reading: A Test of Engagement Theory

The most recent model to emerge in sociolinguistic perspectives on literacy development is engagement theory (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996). Engaged readers are characterized as motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and socially interactive individuals (Baker et al., 1996) who choose to read frequently for diverse purposes, and who can appropriately comprehend texts (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996). Engagement theory has been employed primarily to account for the development of skilled young (i.e., school-age) readers. Subsequently, little attention has been devoted to adults' engagement with reading materials. Previous research has, however, demonstrated significant relationships between reading and growth of the knowledge base and vocabulary (West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993), and reading practices and literacy abilities (Smith, 1996) among adults. Other studies have examined adults' involvement in reading for pleasure (McQuillan & Conde, 1996; Nell, 1988), but no studies to date have examined adults' reading engagement across a variety of reading tasks and purposes.

This study examined the extent to which adults' engage in reading tasks to meet a variety of personal purposes and needs. Differences between educational and occupational groups

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were examined in regards to reading engagement and the types of reading materials most likely to stimulate engaged reading were identified. Primarily, amount of time spent reading, reading effort, and enjoyment of reading tasks were used as indicators of engagement.

Five questions were posed in this research. I wanted to know when engaged reading is most likely to occur:
(1) when adults read which kinds of text sources (e.g, correspondence, periodicals, books)?
(2) for which kinds of reading purposes (e.g., working, learning)?
(3) in which reading settings (e.g., workplace, home, community)?
(4) for which educational attainment groups?
(5) for which occupational groups?
Also, because skilled readers are characterized as engaged readers (Baker et al., 1995) I wanted to know what kinds of engaged reading behaviors are reported by highly-skilled readers. A subsample of participants who scored above the 75th percentile on a standardized adult reading ability test were the subjects of this analysis.

Method

Reading behavior data were obtained on a large sample of adults. One hundred and fifty-nine (n=159) adults recorded their everyday reading practices for five days using a highly-structured, paper-and-pencil diary. A variety of methods were used to establish the reliability and validity of the diary method. For example, about one-fourth of the sample kept diaries as many as four times (for 3-5 days each time) over a one-year period. Only data from the Time 1 diaries (i.e., five days of data for each participant) were analyzed for the study reported here.

Sample. The participants were community-dwelling adult volunteers who were recruited for the study by graduate students in research methods courses taught at a large midwestern university. The sample was fairly homogenous--primarily white, middle class, and well-educated (median education = 14 years), but a wide variety of occupations were represented. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 83, and the average age was 44.2 years.

Participants were recruited in five waves of samples beginning in Spring 1993. Data collection for the final wave took place in Summer 1995. Sizes of the waves varied from 26 to 42 participants.

Measure. The Reading Activity Method (RAM) diary is structured so that participants record their reading activities "on-line" on a daily, hour-by-hour basis. Both quantitative and qualitative data are derived from the diary. The RAM diary contains data forms which are color-coded to correspond to four 6-hour periods during a single day (e.g., 6:01 am to 12:00 pm: pink form). These forms consist of clearly marked rows (individual hours of the day, e.g., 6:01 a.m.-7:00 a.m.) and columns in which the following information is recorded for each reading event:
(1) source of material read (e.g., correspondence, magazine, book);
(2) setting (i.e., where reading occurs: work, school, library, home);

(3) reading time (i.e., number of minutes spent reading each source);
(4) reading volume (i.e., number of pages read for each source);
(5) purpose for reading each source (e.g., for work, school, leisure; personal, and miscellaneous);
(6) effort at reading (rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale: 5="very much effort"; 1="very little, or no, effort");
(7) strategies for learning and remembering (i.e., any strategies or memory aids which assist in learning information to be remembered for later use, such as at work or for a school test);
(8) enjoyment of reading (i.e., on a 5-point Likert-type scale, 5="very enjoyable"; 1="very unenjoyable").

Participants were instructed to record their reading activities for five consecutive days, or any five days during the two-week data collection periods. Both written and verbal instructions for diary completion were provided to each participant. Additional information regarding the RAM diary development, procedures for coding the obtained data, and results of the complete study can be found in Smith (in preparation).

Criteria for reading engagement. Engaged readers are motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and socially interactive individuals (Baker et al., 1996). They read frequently for many different reasons, and they can readily comprehend what they read (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996). Consistent with these characteristics, I examined the diary data for evidence of engaged reading among the participants. The following criteria were used to identify 'engaged reading' behaviors:
(1) amount of reading time per reading event equal to or greater than the median for all reading events in the Time 1 data set (median = 20 minutes). Such extended time devoted to a given reading task is indicative of a reader's deep involvement in the text and the reading activity.
(2) Reading effort rating equal to 4 or 5 (i.e., 'high effort'). Although much reading activity is effortless (Massamini, Csikzentmihalyi, & Della Fave, 1988), I reasoned that careful attention to the reading task, concentration and effortful activity were indicative of high engagement in the reading activity.
(3) Reading enjoyment equal to 4 or 5 (i.e., 'high enjoyment').
Enjoyment is a dimension of intrinsic motivation and implies that the reader finds the reading task gratifying (Guthrie et al., 1996). Such tasks are more likely to be sustained and may lead to increased understanding of the text information.

The participants' strategies for reading different kinds of text materials were also examined, as engaged readers are assumed to be strategic in their reading behaviors in order to comprehend and use text information in skillful ways (Guthrie et al, 1996; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

Results

This research generated a very large data set consisting of more than 9,450 individual reading events for the Time 1 data set. Data coding categories included eleven categories of

reading source materials (e.g., correspondence, general books, school books, informational materials) nine settings (e.g., home, school, workplace), six purposes (e.g., learning, working, playing), and 18 categories of reading strategies (e.g., note-taking, varying reading rate), all of which were developed from the obtained data.

Based on the above criteria for engaged reading, there was a total of 492 engaged reading events, or five percent of the total reading events recorded by the sample. For these instances of engaged reading, the most prevalent text source was periodicals (including magazines, journals, and newspapers), 132 events (27% of total engaged reading events), followed by general books and religious materials combined (26% of total) and functional and informational text sources (19% of total).

Engaged reading was equally likely to occur when adults read for either functional/informational/consumer purposes (29% of engaged reading events), leisure purposes (25% of events), or for work (25%). None of the participants were students, so engaged reading for school/learning purposes occurred for only ten percent of the events.

Consistent with the findings regarding reading sources and purposes, engaged reading occurred more than half of the time (58% of events) in the home. Another thirty percent of engaged reading events took place in the workplace. Engaged reading was virtually nonexistent in other settings, such as at school and church, while traveling or commuting, at a public library, while shopping (consumer), and at recreational sites.

The four occupational groups in the sample did not differ from one another in their engaged reading practices. The service, production and agricultural group reported 31% of the total engaged reading events, the crafts and trades group reported 30% of the total, and those in the disciplinary and health care occupational group reported 27% of the total engaged reading events. The business occupational group (e.g., administrative, managerial, sales) accounted for the remaining 12% of all of the reported engaged reading events. In order to more carefully examine the association of occupation with engaged reading behavior, I then determined those individuals who reported the greatest number of engaged reading events and their occupations. Among the 10 participants who reported 15 or more engaged reading events, there was no common occupation.

Among the educational attainment groups, there were no differences in frequency of engaged reading behavior between those persons with the least amount of education (i.e., 12 years or less or schooling; 31% of total) and those with the most schooling (i.e., 17 or more years; (30% of total). Participants with more than a high school education but less than a college degree accounted for 25% of the total and college degree recipients accounted for the remaining 14% of the total engaged reading events.

Among the three age groups (young = 20-35 years; middle = 26-49 years; older = 50-84 years), the middle age group reported the highest frequency of engaged reading (48% of total), followed by the older adults (32% of total) and the youngest adults (20%).

For slightly more than one-third (35%) of the engaged reading events, no learning strategy use was reported. Rereading and note-taking combined accounted for 20% of the reported learning strategies and memorization and relating new information to prior knowledge accounted for 14% of the total.

Reading Ability and Engagement

Reading test scores were obtained for the fifth wave of the RAM sample, which consisted of 28 participants. All had completed the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (NDRT). Because the NDRT provides a more objective measure of reading ability, it is useful in identifying those individuals who are high ability readers. The research literature suggests that skillfulness is another characteristic of engaged reading. The group mean comprehension test performance equalled 66.0 [(s.d.=8.5), percentile rank = 59]. The engaged reading practices of 11 participants who scored one-half standard deviation above the group mean (e.g., score of 70 and above; percentile rank = 75) were then examined to determine if the engaged reading practices of these more skilled readers differed from those of the sample.

Interestingly, only four of these participants were found to be engaged readers. These individuals were a teacher, a professor, a chemist, and a minister--all occupations which require extensive engagement with texts. There were some interesting differences in the engaged reading behaviors of this very select sample of readers and the larger sample. While nearly half of their engaged reading pertained to information sources and periodicals (47%), they were more likely to perform engaged reading for work-related purposes (56% of total) and to do so while at work (57%). They did not differ in their strategy use, however, from the larger sample.

Discussion

Engagement in reading is of interest to literacy educators because of the many benefits that derive from reading, such as increased understanding about the world, diverse aesthetic experiences, and acquisition of new skills and competencies (Guthrie et al., 1996). The engaged reading practices of adults has garnered less attention among adult educators, but should be of particular importance because analyses of their practices can provide useful information to adult literacy practitioners.

The results from this study suggest that engaged reading behavior is a relatively rare event among even very literate adults, occurring less than one time in ten reading events. This finding may, of course, be a function of the criteria used to determine engaged reading. It is possible that engaged reading occurs for briefer time intervals (e.g., 10 minutes or less of reading) and when readers are devoting somewhat less effort and attention to the reading task. Other studies (e.g., Guthrie & Seifert, 1983) have shown that the median daily reading time for various text sources is much less than 20 minutes.

Because of the nature of this study, however, the participants were individuals who spend a good portion of their daily lives reading for a variety of purposes. Thus, the median reading time for this more select sample of adults can reasonably be expected to exceed that found

among other more representative samples.

Based on the criteria used for this study the kinds of engaged reading behavior demonstrated by the participants has a highly functional character. That is, engaged reading was most likely to occur in order to obtain information in order to perform a task or to learn something while reading at home or in the workplace. Periodicals such as newspapers and information text sources such as brief documents were read for these purposes and elicited readers' engagement. These findings are in contrast to the kinds of engaged reading which have been described for younger, school-aged readers. Children's engaged reading typically occurs when they read narrative materials such as stories.

A somewhat surprising finding was that engaged reading occurred as frequently for the least educated adults as that found among those having the most education. Perhaps the former group, who are likely to be the least skilled readers, must devote more time and effort towards understanding and making use of the text materials which they read. The kinds of occupations in which the low educational attainment group are employed may also require more effortful and extensive reading practices. Further analyses of the data may shed some light on the reasons for this finding.

Engagement theory characterizes engaged readers as being able to skillfully comprehend the texts that they read (Guthrie et al., 1995). even the most skilled readers are not always engaged readers, characterized by intensity of effort, high levels of enjoyment of the reading tasks, and sustained reading over time. Only four of the 11 participants who scored at or above the 75th percentile of a standardized reading abilities test displayed such engaged reading behavior. This finding suggests that educators should not assume that students who are good readers will, in fact, be readers. Encouraging wide reading activity among all students should be a standard practice (Guthrie et al., 1995).

It is possible that outcomes distinct from those found in this study might occur given different criteria for engaged reading. The study is limited, of course, by the data which were collected. Although the primary purpose of the original study was not to examine engaged reading, the available data suggest that adults' reading engagement is associated with different kinds of texts, tasks, and settings. Obviously, further research is necessary to more fully understand the nature of engaged reading among diverse samples of adults. Such studies should include observations of engaged reading behaviors, and interviews with individuals who exemplify engagement in order to determine the personal, social and cognitive variables which contribute to adults' engagement with texts. Survey methods such as the RAM will also be helpful in documenting engaged reading practices.

These suggestions are consistent with Guthrie and Greaney (1991) who have urged literacy researchers to seek to understand the kinds of decisions that individuals make about the different print materials they read, how social contexts affect these decisions, and the outcomes of various reading practices. Engagement theory offers a fresh perspective for examining these issues.

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